

April 11, 2010: THE KINGDOM AND THE GLORY
Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; Psalm 150
Eileen Parfrey -- Springwater Presbyterian Church

I'm probably the only preacher in America not talking about Doubting Thomas today. We get the same story every first Sunday after Easter, and I am sick to death of treating Thomas' "doubts" like they're something bad. I go with the person who said "doubt is the shadow cast by faith." How can *that* be bad? Besides, I don't think doubt is the American problem. Nor is it the disciples' problem for their day in court.

Significant plot development has occurred since last weekend when the arrest and execution of their leader caused them to doubt the very nature of God. Even the resurrection caused its own doubts about God and the kingdom and their role in it. Since then, they have received the Holy Spirit, discovered they can heal, they've eliminated poverty in their community through the simple expedient of sharing, and escaped from prison. All this raised enough eyebrows that they've been hauled up to religious court. The authorities don't know what to do with these people whose doubts have taken them a different path, so they have the disciples beaten to within a literal inch of their lives, then release them to experience new theological doubts over whether Gentiles can believe in Jesus. The early church is in a continuous cycle of doubt and renewal. Only the people who refuse to doubt, the religious establishment, are left in the dust of God's New Thing.

Peter's sermon point is that Something Happened on the cross and in the resurrection, namely that repentance and forgiveness have become a package deal.¹ As of now, forgiveness isn't anything we earn (that's what the resurrection says) and repentance isn't anything we accomplish (that's what the cross says). Peter claims the apostolic commission to witness to this, claiming it on behalf of all Jesus' disciples with first-hand knowledge of him. That's what a witness is—someone with firsthand knowledge of an event or person or fact. Judge Judy is a stickler for firsthand knowledge. If you weren't there yourself or can't produce someone who was, it's all hearsay. If you overheard it in the local barber shop, the term is "gossip." Peter and the gang can attest truths about Jesus because they have firsthand experience of them.

I'm beginning to believe that the reason so many mainline churches argue so much about doctrinal issues is because we have so little firsthand *experience* of the full-package deal of repentance and forgiveness. We're so concerned about who's in and who's out that we're able to mask our lack of firsthand experience of God. We're all about right thinking, right doctrine, and right acting, so afraid of doubt that our "witness" is the religious equivalent of gossip. In our effort to avoid delving more deeply into the questions of who we are, we don't get around to asking who God is.

John the Revelator doesn't have this problem. Maybe because he experienced persecution for his faith and found God trustworthy, maybe that's what gave him such an immediate experience of God as the Almighty. He ends today's rhapsodic "Dear Churches" beginning to his letter by calling God "the Almighty." At least, the NRSV translates it as "Almighty," and so do most of the other translations. But that word doesn't mean what you think. We can blame Jerome who, when he translated the Bible from Greek to Latin, used the Latin "omnipotent" for the Greek "pantokrator." Omnipotent connotes strength and power—almighty—whereas the Greek is about God as Creator and Source of all life, and therefore *in all things*. Our heads do gymnastics about doctrine while we forget to *experience* the sensuous love of God—the love that comes through our senses of seeing, hearing, smell, touch, taste—God Pantokrator *in all things*. We're stuck in our heads, *thinking* about God, when the divine breath (*ruah*, the Hebrew word for breath, air, spirit) is filling our lungs, inspiring us to deepen our *being* in God.

We read "repentance" as if it's something we accomplish, something we initiate to trigger a forgiveness response from God. Peter says they are a package deal, both are a gift from God, both are the result of that Good Friday to Easter weekend experience. We don't sing God's praises all

¹ James Boyce, WorkingPreacher.org

night, like that nameless Creole woman in Haiti who kept alive Jon Larson's spirits the night of the earthquake. Only people who have *experienced* God would have it cross their minds to *praise* God while the earth's crust creaks and heaves.

Melanie Weidner shared with us Tuesday night a list of Qualities for Chaos that she wrote for a college student workshop. The world these 20-year-olds is facing is different from the world we faced on the verge of our career decisions. We were able to make assumptions about limitless futures and the power of bootstraps. But for these kids, the assumptions are different. They face a constricting economy, Third World brain drain to America, depletion of resources, shrinking polar ice caps, cyber space invasions. What Melanie lifted up were characteristics to help us survive and thrive in these challenging times. Things like curiosity, spaciousness, gratitude, grieving, presence, simplicity, love-the-questions, there-is-enough, trust, clarity. (If you want the complete list, there are copies on the usher's table in the sermon manuscript folder.) These qualities reflect the kingdom Jesus preached. They are qualities we need, qualities that enable credible witness to that package deal that ushers in the kingdom.

I don't think, however, that these are qualities we accomplish. Like the repentance and forgiveness package, we receive them when we are open and available to God. They might, in fact, describe the repentance-forgiveness package in current language. Repent means literally "change direction." When we change our direction and head toward the One who died in solidarity with humanity, we make ourselves available to these qualities. That turning toward God is permission to use us as firsthand, credible witnesses to the kingdom in the here-and-now. It is then that we receive from God the energy and courage to keep picking up and starting over again. Even when we fail. Even when we drop the ball. Even when we make a mess of things. Starting over, trying again. That is what we call forgiveness. It's already given, so you *can* repent.

[Home Page](#)
[sermons index](#)